

In Touch with Literacy
Through Postage Stamps
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Poster: "In Touch with Literacy Through Postage Stamps"

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Although for centuries the mass of blind people were forced to (Lowenfeld, 1975) *attempt sustaining themselves by begging*, there were those who were educated. (Miles, 1999) *The tradition of blind musicians at the imperial court dates back to antiquity in China. Occupational guilds of blind people also existed for many centuries in China and Japan. Medieval and early modern texts indicate that some formal education was given to blind trainees in musicianship, acupuncture and therapeutic massage, and fortune-telling, in China, Japan and Korea. In North Africa, Middle-East and parts of Asia (Miles, 1999) the Muslim tradition of blind men memorizing the Koran and sayings of the Prophet Muhammed, acting as teachers and public reciters of texts dates back several hundred years.*

In ancient times there were many blind people who were poets and storytellers. The most notable was Homer (circa 850 BC -) *Greece, 1954* There is much debate about if Homer actually lived or if he was more than one person or just one of the many ancient blind poet storytellers.

Adulhasan Rudagi *Iran, 1958* was a blind poet who lived in Persia about 952. He wrote thousands of verses. His motto was "Wisdom is Better than Eye or Sight". The blind 15th century Indian poet Surdas, *India 1952*, is noted for his simplicity and sweetness. "Sursager", a collection of his poems is considered a masterpiece of literature in the national language.

As access to information increased by the introduction of the printing press in Europe during the 15th century, society moved further and further away from oral, memorization education. The blind found that they became more and more isolated from intellectual advancement by having to rely on the sighted to read to them. Some like John Milton (1608-1674) *Hungary, 1967*, after losing his sight, wrote by using the sight of his daughters to record his thoughts.

The door to the education of the blind, as we know it today was opened by the Frenchman Valentin Haüy (1745-1822) *France, 1959*. He started what is considered to be the first school for the blind in the modern world in Paris in 1784. Haüy's instruction was different from most other forms that had before been tried in Europe that generally stressed hand skills, such as basket weaving and hand weaving. In addition he stressed the mental abilities of the blind. He observed that they did not, as was most often thought, have a lack of mental abilities; indeed some of his students had an aptitude for mathematics and geography. This is shown in the issue from *Sweden, 1981*, which depicts a student at the Tomteboda School for the Blind (now the Tomteboda Resource Centre) studying a raised globe. Another issue *Indonesia, 1956* shows a student studying a raised map.

Literacy for the blind (reading and writing) was hampered because, (Lorimer, 1996) *a tactile version of the alphabet which could be read by the blind was not invented until two hundred years ago (Haüy 1786) and the means of writing was not evolved until 1821. This development of a means of literacy was caused in part by technological problems but also by a lack of understanding of the needs and capabilities of those lacking the major sense of sight. Because blind people often appeared helpless it was not realized that the remaining senses could be trained.*

Most of the reading systems developed for the blind were based on embossed raised letter systems. Among those was Moon Type, *Ghana, 1982* (which is the only embossed letter system still in use today, mainly by multi-impaired children and elderly blind). As Lorimer points out, although these systems could with difficulty be read they could not be reproduced except by use of printing presses.

It took a blind French boy, Louis Braille (1809-1852), *Antigua & Barbuda 1992, Argentina 1935 & 1976, France 1948, Germany 1975, Guyana 1981, Luxembourg 1977, Mali, 1977, Panama 1981, Peru 1976, Russia, 1959, Saint Lucia 1981, Uruguay 1976* to design the best system ever developed for the blind to both read and write. It was based on a system (night writing), designed by a French army officer, Charles Barbier by which the military could read messages at night. He developed his system for the blind and called it "sonography". After three years of working with sonography Louis Braille developed his own system

using only six dots *Brunei, 1981*. This system, unlike others, had a device by which to write it, slate and stylus *Mauritius 1990*. (The Braille writer that was developed later by Frank Hall in 1892 has made it possible to write Braille in nearly the same way as the typewriter is used. *Antigua & Barbuda 1988, Barbados 1981, Hong Kong 1988, Yemen 1981*.) At long last the blind had an efficient system by which they could both read, *Belgium 1962, Mauritius 1980, China 1985, Cyprus, Denmark 1986, Ghana 1972 & 1982, Jordan 1981, Korea 1981, Mali 1977, Morocco 1969, Netherlands 1931 & 1975, Salvador 1981, Saudi Arabia 1974, Surinam 1981, Transkei 1977* and write.

Today in most parts of the world the majority of blind and visually impaired children are mainstreamed into regular schools, *St. Vincent 1990*. A number of former schools for the blind are now national resource centers providing assessment and training, information, courses and recreational services to children and students with visual impairment and to their families and teachers *Grenada 1981, Swaziland 1981*. Schools for the blind still provide invaluable educational services, especially in the developing countries, which have few mainstream programs. In many countries they also support children in regular schools and provide services for those blind children with multiple impairments, *Belarus 1997, Brazil 1954, Croatia 1995, Egypt 1973, Greece 1977, India, 1987, Jamaica 1987, Mexico 1995, Panama 1961, South Africa 1981, United States 1987*.

Radio was one of the first modern devices of the 20th century, which made it possible to have greater access to information by the blind. This was seen to be of such a great importance that a number of countries gave free radios to the blind, *France 1938*, or that they allowed the blind a free radio license. Some countries in recent years, like the United States have developed radio information services for the blind.

The cost of mailing bulky Braille books and letters was recognized by Canada in 1898, *Canada 1998* when it passed legislation allowing Free Mailing privileges for the blind. Other countries soon followed or set reduced postal rates for such materials.

Advances in audio technology during World War II lead to the development of audio tape, *Greenland 1983*. By this means it was made possible for easier recording and playing books, lectures and taking notes in class. This took away some of the need for sighted readers. Advances in low vision aids such as optical aids, special eyeglasses *Pakistan 1965, Seychelles 1970, Tanzania 1992*, magnifiers and CCTVs made it possible for low vision students to use more fully their limited vision.

The computer age has brought about a great many changes.

Braille production of books, magazines and other materials which until recently were produced by having a sighted person first transcribe a Braille text onto metal plates and then going to a printing press, is now mostly computer generated. This allows for much easier translation into foreign languages, *China (Taiwan) 1996, Saudi Arabia 1981 and United Arab Republic 1961*, and mathematical, scientific and music texts.

By far the greatest impact of computers has been in the classroom *India 1987*. The computer has brought about many assistive aids and appliances such as reading machines, which translate print into audio or Braille output, and personal aids like Braille n' Speak. Computers with voice, Braille and image enlargement have greatly enhanced educational accessibility. They have taken the classroom from that of isolation to a global classroom.

Yet there is an ever-growing wider gap between blind students in developed and non-developed countries. In many of these countries there is a lack of even basic reading and writing materials.

As we go into the new millenium we should strive to bring literacy to all blind children. To do so blind children need the support of their national organizations, *France 1989, Spain 1988* which provide Braille, audio books, large print materials, library services, educational aids and appliances and educational training. And especially in developing countries by international organizations like The World Blind Union, *Brazil 1974* and the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment.

Today the world of information can be at every blind child's fingertips through access to the World Wide Web and numerous databases and web sites if only the means can be found to provide access to the new technology.

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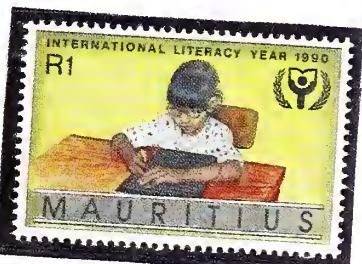
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